

Thursday, July 29, 2010

Sara Howard, 314-962-1523

Cochran VA Medical Center Update:

Two Official Independent Investigations Announced: Government Accountability Office To Include Cochran Safety Lapses In Ongoing VA Investigation; Inspector General Agrees To Launch Formal Investigation

Carnahan Urges VA To Clarify Testing Results, Ensure Prompt Notification To Affected Veterans

(WASHINGTON, DC) - Russ Carnahan today announced that in response to his requests, two official, independent panels will investigate the recent safety lapses at the John Cochran VA Medical Center. The Government Accountability Office - the "watchdog" of Congress - is broadening the scope of an existing VA investigation to include the Cochran matter; and the VA's Inspector General has agreed to a bipartisan request made last week to launch a formal investigation.

"Throughout this process, I have had two primary concerns," Carnahan said. "First, what is being done to make sure that we are taking care of the veterans who were affected by the problems at Cochran. And second, making sure that something like this never happens again. These independent investigations are critical to make sure we have a full understanding of what happened so we can identify and fix any systemic problems that made such a grave error possible."

Staff with the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which is the investigative arm of Congress, briefed Carnahan's staff this week regarding an ongoing investigation into reported problems related to processing reusable medical equipment at several VA Medical Centers across the country. In response to a request made by Carnahan, this investigation will now also include the John Cochran facility, where problems with the sterilization of dental equipment may have exposed over 1,800 veterans from Missouri, Illinois and other states to blood-borne pathogens.

According to the GAO, the final report will be available early next year, and will answer three central questions:

1. How have selected VA medical centers implemented VA's policies and procedures on preventing infections through the reprocessing of reusable medical equipment?
2. How do selected VA medical centers oversee compliance with VA's policies and procedures on preventing infections through the reprocessing of reusable medical equipment?
3. How do VA central office and selected Veterans Integrated Service Networks oversee compliance with VA's policies and procedures on preventing infections through the reprocessing of reusable medical equipment?

Last week, Carnahan led a letter to the Inspector General of the U.S. Veterans' Affairs Department, signed by Republican and Democratic members of the Missouri and Illinois Congressional Delegation as well as the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, urging him to launch a formal investigation into the Cochran lapses. The Inspector General's office responded on Wednesday, indicating that they would look into the matter.

*Carnahan Urges VA To Clarify Testing Results,
Ensure Prompt Notification To Affected Veterans*

Carnahan said he was pleased that the VA had addressed some of the most pressing matters related to the Cochran issue - such as assigning liaisons to work one-on-one with veterans affected by the safety lapses and offering free testing for spouses, partners and other family members. However, he continued to express frustration with the lack of clear information regarding whether the VA has identified any positive Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and/or HIV test results in the affected population. Information released by the VA last week indicated that 1144 veterans have been tested, and 809 have tested negative and been notified. The VA has yet to provide a detailed explanation regarding the gap of 335 people who have been tested, although they have stated that this does not indicate that these veterans have tested positive.

"This is a public health issue," Carnahan said. "If there are veterans who have tested positive, regardless of whether they were exposed through the dental clinic or through some other completely unrelated source, they need to know so that they can get the treatment they need and take needed precautions to keep their spouses and family members safe."

###